



Soviet Historical Drama: Its Role in the Development of a National Mythology

Spencer E. Roberts

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The taste for history is the most aristocratic of all tastes. Ernest Renan "Our century is pre-eminently an historical century . . . Even art has now become pre-eminently historical. The historical novel and drama interest each and everyone more at present than do similar works belonging to the realm of pure fiction. "!

Although Belinskii was writing in 1841, his statement could equally well apply to the Russia of a century later, when the interest in historical fiction had become, if anything, more intense. In fact, the abundance of Soviet historical novels and plays tempts one to believe Heine, when he said that the people want their history handed to them by the poet, not the historian. The infatuation with history to which Belinskii referred was not, however, indigenous to Russia; it was part of a rage, largely inspired by Walter Scott, which had swept western Europe in the early nineteenth century, and which soon spread to Russia. Today, Scott's star has been eclipsed in the West, but it still burns brightly in the Soviet Union. Indeed, it can be said that the West has not only rejected Scott, but, to a considerable extent, the historical novel and plays as well. As one writer recently put it: "The reading public, brought up on a strict diet of sex and science, prefers to take its history undiluted in the form of unexpurgated memoirs and frank biographies.

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